

History, Not “Conspiracy”: Kaleem Caire’s Connections

The recent controversy over the Urban League of Greater Madison’s proposal for a Madison Preparatory Academy has been framed primarily as a local story pitting contending interests within the city. The charter school’s promoters, supporters and mainstream media have portrayed the ULGM’s CEO and President, Kaleem Caire as the Prep’s public champion and native son returned home on a mission to help “close the achievement gap,” the racial disparities in Madison’s schools.

But Caire’s well-established national ties, spanning more than a decade, to numbers of conservative foundations, think tanks and individuals bent on privatizing public school coffers, creating for-profit schools, and destroying teachers’ unions, certainly suggest that there is more to the story.

Caire has consistently dismissed any suggestion of his links to various right-wing efforts. On occasion he has admitted some distant connections but asserted his independence by saying, “They have their agenda, but we have ours.” Lately, he has taken to waving off critic’s references to such ties as nothing more than [“guilt-by-association crap”](#) or part of a “conspiracy” and [“whisper campaign”](#) coming from those trying to discredit the Mad Prep Academy project. However, a readily traceable history reveals some truth to the charges.

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers: the ALEC Connection

At a School Board meeting on December 6, 2010, Caire stated that he had shown the Madison school district’s existing charter school policy to [Greg Richmond](#), President & CEO of the [National Association of Charter School Authorizers \(NACSA\)](#) and that [Richmond was willing to help the Board rewrite it](#). Last November 9th, the Madison Urban League sponsored a [“charter schools seminar”](#) featuring Richmond.

“With Greg's expert knowledge and guidance,” the event announcement read, “we look forward to learning from others and establishing a clear understanding of what we should expect from our school's authorizer (MMSD's Board of Education) and what they and the public should expect from us.” Richmond spoke about “...how cities and school systems across the country are authorizing quality charter schools.”

In a lengthy note dated January 8, 2012 forwarded to John Quinlan, coordinator of Madison’s “Communities United” coalition, Caire listed a number of charges regarding the School Board’s alleged mishandling of the Mad Prep charter proposal. Critical of the approval process, he asserted that everything would have gone a lot smoother if the MMSD “had a process and procedures in place.”

Caire informed Quinlan and others on the Communities United list of attempts to improve the Board’s seemingly flawed procedures:

“Several times we requested that the Board of Education involve the National Association of Charter School Authorizers <<http://www.qualitycharters.org/>>,”

which is the national body that supports and services charter school authorizers nationally (mostly public school boards). NACSA would have helped the Board establish a process and best practices that would have been helpful to all involved. The Board of Education ignored our request. Instead, deliberations and negotiations were piecemeal and more challenging to work through than it [sic] should have been....”

What Caire did not tell Communities United or the public-at-large prior or since was that NACSA and its CEO, Greg Richmond, are not impartial facilitators.

NACSA has been directly connected to the [American Legislative Exchange Council](#) (ALEC), the corporate dominated source of conservative “[model legislation](#)” being pushed by the Walker Republicans in Wisconsin and allied lawmakers across the country.

NACSA has been an affiliate of ALEC’s [Education Task Force](#) and Richmond has been a contributor to ALEC’s newsletter, [Inside ALEC](#). According to its website, NACSA receives funding from the [Walton Family Foundation](#) (Wal-Mart), and the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#), major backers of voucher school initiatives and other nationwide efforts to privatize public schools.

The [Washington Post](#)'s Valerie Strauss reported that the Walton Foundation gave NACSA \$1,874,274 in 2010, while also doling out money to other organizations that in turn funneled money to NACSA. Other groups associated with NACSA include [Knowledge is Power Program](#) (KIPP); the conservative [Hoover Institution](#) think tank; the [New Schools Venture Fund](#) for educational entrepreneurs; and the [Center on Reinventing Public Education](#).

In addition to heading NACSA, Richmond is currently chair of the [Illinois State Charter School Commission](#), created by an Illinois law enacted in the summer of 2011. Distinct from the Illinois State Board of Education, the Commission now has the authority to approve charter school proposals already turned down by local school districts. The unelected panel, similar to [one that has been promoted in the Wisconsin legislature by school privatizers](#), also has the power to monitor the charters it authorizes. Initial operating funds for the Illinois panel have come from the Walton Family Foundation.

Other Connections

Richmond worked from 1994 to 2005 for Chicago Public Schools (CPS) where he created the district's Charter Schools Office and "established the nation's first district-funded capital loan fund for charter schools. . ." From 2003 to 2005, he worked closely with charter school proponent [Arne Duncan](#), who went on to become President Obama’s future Secretary of Education.

Both [Richmond and Duncan spoke on panels at an April, 2004 Chicago conference](#) of the [Philanthropy Roundtable](#), the major consortium of conservative foundations dedicated to moving American society to the right through “strategic” and “leveraged philanthropy.” Richmond spoke to an October, 2004 Roundtable gathering on "[How Small Foundations](#)

[Can Jumpstart the CharterSchool Movement?](#)". In April 2009, he spoke on a panel at the largely right-wing [American Enterprise Institute](#) titled "Race to the Top? The Promise-- and Challenges-- of Expanding the Reach of Charter Schools."

The [Roundtable](#) is funded by an array of conservative foundations, including the notorious [Charles G. Koch Foundation](#), and the [Scaife Family Foundation](#), a backer of anti-affirmative action initiatives.

Another Roundtable backer has been the Milwaukee-based [Lynde & Harry Bradley Foundation](#), a key supporter of the [Black Alliance for Educational Options \(BAEO\)](#). Kaleem Caire currently lists himself as the [BAEO's "Founding President & CEO"](#). He served from 1999 to 2002 as the group's national director.

The BAEO, a significant advocate of school vouchers, has also been party to a campaign largely bankrolled by influential right wing foundations. Backers have included the Bradley Foundation and the [Walton Family Foundation](#) (Wal-Mart). According to a series of articles done for the [Black Commentator](#), a critical left-leaning African-American online journal, Bradley and Walton spent at least \$2 million to create the BAEO.

Is this the kind of "guilt-by-association" that Caire has criticized? It could be if he did not have a clear working relationship with Gregg Richmond. It could be if Caire himself did not [appear on panels such as the one at the Philanthropy Roundtable's](#) 2004 annual meeting where he spoke on "breakthroughs in education...", as well as the challenges that lay ahead." Appearing alongside Caire were James Shelton, program director for education at the Gates Foundation, and Phoebe Boyer, executive director of New York City's [Tiger Foundation](#) and head of the board of the [NYC Charter Center](#).

Caire also has been [a featured speaker](#) at [various events](#) sponsored by the [CATO Institute](#), the libertarian think tank long associated with various right-wing causes.

In 2001, the BAEO commissioned a report on [High School Graduation Rates in the United States](#) published by the [Manhattan Institute for Policy Research](#), the influential neoconservative think tank. Caire wrote the study's forward.



Kaleem Caire and the Manhattan Institute's [Jay Greene](#), author of the BAEO-commissioned *High School Graduation Rates in the United States* at a February, 2003 full-day conference sponsored by the [CATO Institute's Center for Educational Freedom](#).

[Caire tells us](#) that from 2002 through 2005 he was executive director Fight for Children, Inc., (FFC) founded by the international real estate speculator and former chair of [Business Executives for National Security](#), arch-conservative [Joseph E. Robert, Jr.](#) FFC's [significant institutional donors](#) at the time included the Waltons and the [Dick & Betsy DeVos Foundation](#), another backer of numerous conservative causes. The Devos duo has also been a [long-term contributor to the BAEO](#).

The billionaire former president of the Amway Corp, [Dick DeVos](#) has been heavily involved in the movement to privatize of public schools. He and his wife Betsy, a Religious Right activist and former chair of the Michigan Republican Party, founded and fund the American Federation for Children (AFC), one of the [most aggressive pro-voucher groups, which aims to fully privatize public education](#).

Wal-Mart heir John Walton, honored by the BAEO as one of its major patrons, also contributed millions to the forerunner of the AFC, the Betsy DeVos-led [All Children Matter](#), founded in the spring of 2003 to recruit, train and fund candidates willing to promote school vouchers nationwide.

The White Right Agenda

A 2003 report on the BAEO by [People for the American Way](#) (PFAW) noted that while Kaleem Caire was national director of the group, it ran a multi-million dollar public relations campaign for voucher schools, aimed primarily at African-American communities but also at white progressives and moderates.

According to the report, the BAEO effort at the time was “the most recent tactic to emerge from the Right’s strategic campaign to re-cast the image of the voucher movement and build broader political support for policies that would undermine the public education system.” PFAW pointed out that “the Right has tried to cultivate a small, but visible, base of African American support for its agenda on such issues as vouchers and gay rights.”

The Report went on to state that, “Right-wing groups have also put a great deal of effort into cultivating African-American spokespeople, and working to counter the legacy of mistrust that communities of color have for a movement that has historically ranged from indifference to opposition toward racial justice efforts. Yet, at the same time, the right-wing political movement has continued to attack traditional civil rights leaders and initiatives.”

People for the American Way also viewed the BAEO in the early 2000s as “the latest step in the Right’s long effort to portray school vouchers as the new civil rights fight.” While noting that the group brought together many African-American voucher supporters, a fraction of whom were involved in right-wing politics, it also pointed out that that BAEO occupied a place among the other think tanks and local organizations that had been “created with money from right-wing foundations as well as individuals and

organizations hoping to profit from promoting increased privatization of public education.”

The PFAW report came to the conclusion that, “many of the group’s members will no doubt find a profitable existence in the growing sector of private education businesses.”

A Promise for the Future?

Those intent on privatizing public school funds, either through individual vouchers or by opening unaccountable “non-instrumentality” academies, have become increasingly sophisticated in their public relations campaigns. Clearly, local initiatives cannot be separated from a broader offensive, backed primarily by right-wing corporate interests. After all, there are dollars to be had from public school coffers, hearts and minds to be shifted rightward, and school board seats to be won through various promises of “school reform.” Caveat emptor.